

# Congo on My Mind': The Belgian Response to Mali

January 19, 2013

By [thehollandbureau](#)



By Frank Gerits

On 20 December 2013, the French president François Hollande acknowledged in front of the Algeria parliament that France had subjugated Algeria for 132 years to a system that was fundamentally brutal and unjust, “Ce système a un nom: c’est du colonialisme.” In doing so he subscribed to a myth that is shared by the left and the right in France, namely that the Algerian war had been disastrous. By implication, the French colonial system in French Africa in general had been well-managed and humane.

In this light the French intervention in Mali is only another step in a long history, in which arguments about cultural ties and stability – consciously and unconsciously – are refashioned to fit the accepted norms of the international system. The fact that the insurgency in the north of the country is considered to be the work of terrorists is a case in point. However, focusing on this explanation eclipses other drivers of policy, which are important to explain the Belgian response.

What is striking is the fact that the Belgian parliament has given the government a blank check. During the intervention in Libya in 2011 the resolution of parliament stated that the government would have to report back every few weeks about the developments on the ground. Today, no such requirement exists. What is even more striking is that Belgium has sent 2 cargo planes, 2 helicopters and 80 soldiers, while the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frans Timmermans, has shown more restraint. Dutch support has been given, but [he refrained from offering any material support](#), instead calling for an international response and an acceleration of a European training mission, a line of action normally followed by Belgium.

Why does a little country like Belgium follow the French reasoning so easily? The answer lies in the colonial past. Both France and Belgium were colonizers in Africa, and today still have a lot of interests on the continent. Yet African nations are becoming increasingly assertive, where countries do not shy from negotiating with the Chinese to get their way and are guarding their oil and uranium sources – also present in Mali. The small amount of Belgian material support is important for France, because it means concrete political back-up for the intervention. In exchange the Belgian diplomats hope that they can count on the French in the Security Council to put the Congo – and particularly East Congo – on the agenda.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Didier Reynders declared in the Belgian late-night talk show 'Reyers Laat', that the Belgian intervention was motivated by the violation of women's rights and the fact that Belgium cannot negotiate with terrorists, particularly "real terrorists". How much, he himself is convinced by this remains an open question. When he was appointed in 2010, parliament asked him to redraft his policy paper so it would reflect the human rights line of Belgian diplomacy and be less focused on realpolitik.

While the protection of human rights undoubtedly plays a part, it is hardly a solid ground for decision making. When are human rights violated enough to intervene? Other factors often come into play. In this case both countries guard their interests in Africa, but package their intervention in the language of (counter-)terrorism. The capital city of Mali, Bamako, is being threatened by Islamic militants from the north, and if Mali falls – the reasoning goes – this could destabilize the entire region and even bring terrorism to Europe's doorstep.

This forward strategy is almost never a sufficient reason to intervene, and in the case of Mali it has a cynical edge. First and foremost, the insurgency in the north of the country is an African problem that escapes the simplistic logic of Islamic radicalism. This line has been adopted by among others [Vicki Huddleston](#), the US ambassador to Mali from 2000 to 2005. Secondly, the insurgents are divided amongst themselves into different warring factions, fighting with arms that were supplied to them by Khadafi. Hardly a potential international threat. Thirdly, the unrest in Mali is a direct consequence of the western intervention in Libya, where Khadafi's defeat pushed trained and armed tuareghs back into Mali. With refugees already pouring into Mauritania – scene of human rights violations and a military coup in 2008 – stability seems to be far from certain.

<http://www.thehollandbureau.com/2013/01/19/congo-on-my-mind-the-belgian-response-to-mali/>